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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2109  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1974  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2545  
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 ASHGABAT 001229

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/15/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KCRM](#) [KISL](#) [SOCI](#) [TX](#)  
SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: KHITROVKA - - INITIAL HOTWASH

REF: A. ASHGABAT 1091  
[1](#)B. ASHGABAT 1209

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Police were in a gun battle September 12 at a bottled water factory north of town with a group of men linked to the two suspects who escaped following the shooting of peace officers on September 8. Starting late on September 12 and extending until the afternoon of September 13, police, Ministry of National Security officers, and soldiers conducted an operation against individuals in the Khitrovka neighborhood. The police brought in artillery. Gunfire and explosions could be heard from different parts of the city. About 20-40 police and soldiers, who were scared and apparently poorly trained, were killed. Police casualties also include SWAT team members. The men fighting the police appear to be connected to a Khitrovka mosque known for extreme religious views. One of the individuals involved in the September 8 shooting is the leader of the mosque. The official explanation is that the men were drug traffickers. While a small few may be trying to "reconnect to their Muslim roots" by dabbling in Salafism, religious extremism has no attraction to the overwhelming majority of Turkmen. END SUMMARY.

#### WHAT HAPPENED

[1](#)2. (SBU) On September 8, two men, one armed with an AK-47, attacked a three-man patrol attempting to question them in an armed robbery of a gas station in early August (Ref A). One of the members of the patrol was killed and the other two were wounded (Ref B). This occurred on the corner near the Azadi mosque in Khitrovka. The suspects escaped, and security was significantly beefed up around the city. (Police released photos of the two suspects, Hudayberdi Amandurdyev and Ahmet Hojagulyev, to RS0.)

[1](#)3. (C) The suspects remained at large until September 12 when Embassy FSNI was told by police contacts mid-afternoon that police had 6-7 suspects trapped and surrounded in a bottled water factory north of Ashgabat. Police contacts said that police, by that time, had exchanged gunfire with the suspects for some 2-3 hours. When police cleared out the factory, they found caches of weapons and food. It was clear that the suspects had planned to hold out for some time. There have

been rumors that the suspects took hostages at the bottling plant, but we have had no confirmation. An FSN that lives in Khitrovka said parents were called to come get their children from the neighborhood school and take them home. The school remained closed on Saturday, normally a school day for Turkmen kids.

¶4. (C) Later that evening, it became obvious that the standoff earlier in the day was not the end of the confrontation between this group and the police. An FSN who lives in Khitrovka said that she started hearing gunfire when she came home from work, but later in the evening heard explosions. Diplomatic drivers standing outside a farewell reception for the departing Chinese ambassador counted 40 vehicles in the motorcade taking President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov home (normally there are 7 - 10 vehicles). After midnight, RSO and FSNI both reported hearing gunfire and explosions. Around 1:30am September 13, Charge heard explosions from her home in the southern Ashgabat Berzengi neighborhood. Marines said they also heard it from the Marine House. Various diplomatic colleagues reported hearing gunfire around 6:00am. (NOTE: Police action occurred on the north end of town. American residents are located on the southern end of town, which was out of harms way. Ashgabat is a small city. Being able to hear gunfire in the middle of the still night from the opposite part of town is conceivable. END NOTE.)

¶5. (C) According to neighborhood source, Saturday's action was centered around two blocks from the Azadi mosque. Police

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had brought in four artillery pieces. FSNI was told by current Turkmenistan SWAT soldier that 20-40 police were killed, including several members of the SWAT team. FSNI, listening in to the police radio, noted an almost Keystone Cops reaction to the crisis. Police had asked for grenades, but it took an hour for them to be delivered. Then, when the grenades, which had been manufactured in 1972, arrived, the police discovered that they didn't work, because they were so old. Gas that the police tried to use also did not work properly. There appeared to be Bureaucratic command issues. In one case, a sniper sought his commander's authorization to fire on a suspect. It took the commander ten minutes to give authorization, and by that time, the suspect was no longer in the sniper's sights.

¶6. (C) Soldiers and MNB officers near the area were scared and unprofessional. They were observed drinking vodka shots while the operation was still ongoing. They also hid behind cars and bushes. The neighbors of one FSN, whose conscript son was killed in the violence, believe his death was the result of friendly fire due to police incompetence. (COMMENT: We have been unable so far to get good information on casualty figures other than police/soldiers. Officially, nine officers were killed, but unofficially, police sources said 20-40 were killed. We are working on getting better total figures and should have something in the near future. END COMMENT.)

¶7. (C) Around 3:10pm, DATT observed at least 200 soldiers and police in the Khitrovka area. It appeared that officers were conducting a house-to-house operation. By late afternoon, the operation was over and shooting had stopped.

LITTLE NEWS IN THE PRESS

¶8. (SBU) The Turkmenistan government did not issue an official statement until September 15. Before then, there were no media reports of the gas station robbery, the September 8 shooting, or of incidents on September 12-13. In the September 15 Neytralniy Turkmenistan official newspaper, the statement read, "According to the Office of the Prosecutor General of Turkmenistan, a criminal gang of persons involved in illegal drug trafficking, has been unveiled as a result of operation-search activities in

Ashgabat. Related to this, special units of law enforcement agencies of Turkmenistan carried out an operation to arrest them, as a result of which the criminal gang was neutralized on September 13, 2008. The Office of the Prosecutor General is currently conducting a criminal investigation."

EVERYTHING IS OK

¶9. (SBU) Despite the gunfighting in the capital, the government projected an image of business as usual. A planned trip by the president to Balkan province to open several buildings in the center of the town of Esenguly went off as planned. And when the president travels, the government leadership goes with him. Although President Berdimuhamedov and Deputy Chairman/Foreign Minister Meredov helicoptered in at 4:30pm and stayed until 10:00pm, most of the rest of the government (Deputy Chairmen, Cabinet Ministers, parliamentarians, Council on Religious Affairs, Institute for Democracy and Human Rights Director Shirin Akhmedova, etc.) left for this small town with the diplomatic corps at 7:00am September 13 and returned the next afternoon together with the diplomats. Underscoring normality, during a special concert in honor of the president's visit, Berdimuhamedov got up and danced with several members of the audience during two songs. The trip, the building openings and tours, the concert, and the dancing president were all taped for television.

WHAT WAS GOING ON? - THE OFFICIAL EXPLANATION

¶10. (SBU) On September 13, Berdimuhamedov told Charge that there had been a situation in Ashgabat, but that it was

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already over (4:50pm). Police had dealt with a big group of narcotraffickers, who had all been arrested or killed. Turkmenistan takes this issue seriously and so has allocated \$4 million to fight narcotics.

-- RELIGIOUS EXTREMISTS?

¶11. (S) According to Polish ambassador Maciej Lang, a former Director for Central Asia in the Polish MFA, the Khitrovka area is an area that even during the Soviet period - during the 70s and 80s - was known for crime. It also has religious extremists. He said that Khitrovka mosque #2 has a long history for teaching extremism, and that the police had left it alone in the past. The older brother of Hudayberdi Amandurdyev, one of the suspects from the September 8 shooting, was arrested in 1994 or 1995 for agitation and passing out leaflets. The elder Amandurdyev was jailed, and later was killed. Lang said, interestingly, Merv Iranian News had published a statement by the Iranian ambassador to Turkmenistan on September 6 that spoke of the rise of Salafism (Wahhabism) in Turkmenistan. The Iranian ambassador told Lang that the group had gotten its weapons from Afghanistan.

¶12. (S) The FSN who lives in Khitrovka confirmed what Lang had said about Khitrovka mosque #2. She said that the people who attend that mosque, which is located near her home, do not freely associate with others and are very strict religiously. Men usually wear beards and no ties. The women keep covered. The FSN said both Amandurdyev and Hojagulyev were well known members of the mosque. She said Amandurdyev was the mosque leader and was known for being "very strict in terms of religion."

¶13. (S) Acting UNICEF representative Abdul Alim (strictly protect) told Charge that he agrees with the statement in Merv quoting the Iranian ambassador, because he himself has met with Wahhabists in Turkmenistan. Alim, a devout Muslim originally from Pakistan, who belongs to a moderate Muslim movement, said he has visited Wahhabist mosques in Ashgabat and in Abadan (about 30 minutes to the west of Ashgabat). Alim said UN Special Rapporteur Asma Jahangir also met with

Wahhabists during her September 4-11 visit to Turkmenistan. Alim said the Wahhabists he met are young men in their late teens and early 20s. They are trying to reconnect with their Muslim roots. He offered they are also trying to fill an ideological vacuum in a post-Soviet/post-Niyazov society.

¶14. (S) Alim said he raised his concerns about extremists with Foreign Minister Meredov in a meeting several months ago. Meredov became angry and claimed there are no religious extremists in Turkmenistan.

-- POLITICAL?

¶15. (C) The Iranian ambassador also told Polish Ambassador Lang that he thought there might be a political connection, involving Former Head of Presidential Protection Service Akmurad Rejepov and Niyazov's son, Murad. The FSN from Khitrovka said she would not be surprised if the people from the mosque were involved in some kind of crime or even had a political agenda.

¶16. (C) COMMENT: We don't know exactly what this group was up to, but there seems to be enough out there to indicate they were more religiously strict than the average Turkmen. We also cannot discount the possibility that they were involved in narcotics trafficking. Regardless of their motivation, whether it was drugs, extremism or political, none of those is necessarily mutually exclusive. What is clear is that criminals have easier access to guns than we knew before and the capacity of Turkmen police/military is shockingly low. Training and improved equipment would help them better deal with the next violent confrontation. Of course, better training would teach not to wait for an order to shoot when you have a suspect in your sights. This is just one more

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example of how years of teaching people that initiative is punishable has led to even more problems.

¶17. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: The vast majority of Turkmen are secular or cultural Muslims. They mix Islamic practice with ancient folk religion, Zoroastrianism, and Soviet cultural practices (drinking vodka, eating pork). While a few people may have headed down the wrong path, religious extremism would have no attraction to the overwhelming majority of Turkmen.  
CURRAN